

Wanted: Writers

No Experience Necessary

By MSG Gil High

The NCO Journal is for and about a group of professionals who generally don't think of themselves as writers. But that doesn't mean that noncommissioned officers can't or don't write. As our Army has become more selective, the force has become better educated.

The same can be said for the experience levels at all grades. As the qualifications have become stiffer, NCOs have had to work longer and harder for promotions. They've sharpened their technical and tactical skills through a whole range of testing and evaluation programs, and they've proved to their officers and soldiers that they're the subject matter experts in their respective fields.

Today, the NCO Corps is both the muscle and sinew of the Army and its institutional memory. It has a great repository of knowledge to share within itself, and to pass on to the next generation of soldiers — enlisted and officers alike.

Every sergeant who has earned his or her stripes has acquired a valuable cache of tricks, tools and guidelines that have proven their success. Most noncommissioned officers readily share that knowledge and experience through the easy, verbal communication we call "foot locker counseling," but few take time to analyze their experiences and put them down in any logical form that goes beyond a few bullets on a piece of scratch paper. That's a shame because the only permanent record or idea that can be shared and analyzed by a wider audience is the written one.

I think the problem is too many leaders wrongly think they don't have the talent or time to write while others think the effort of writing for a professional journal will reap no more reward than a rejection slip.

So let's set the record straight: Like most other activities, good writing comes from setting reasonable goals and exercising the right muscle groups. And as for rejection slips, The NCO Journal is hungry for good material and eager to work with you to develop your ideas into usable journal articles.

The remainder of this article will touch on tricks an experienced writer might use to get an article published. But for those who are looking for more direct assistance, it's available through your local public affairs office where there are people to help you develop, refine and clear your manuscripts before mailing them for publication.

For those already eager to get started, here's an easy-to-follow guide to getting your first article published.

Any journal article, should begin as a good idea that is supported by a statement of purpose. This gives you a base from which to start and a visible goal to keep you on track. A purpose statement also helps you narrow the subject, to keep it within workable limits and to test whether the subject has value to its intended audience.

Because this first step is so critical, feel free to call the journal for help. While we won't commit to using your work until we see the final product, we may make suggestions to improve your focus, or even recommend additional articles to support your main story.

The next step is to begin researching the subject. This may mean calling upon your experiences, interviewing experts, or studying manuals. But another part of research is knowing the publication and audience you're writing for. If that happens to be The NCO Journal, take time to read the entire publication, including the disclaimer on the inside front cover. Look for literary style, subject matter and length of published articles. To translate journal length into manuscript pages,

think of three manuscript pages as one and a half journal columns. It also helps to call a staff member to discuss length, focus, deadlines and what visual support your article may need.

Once your research is complete, make an outline. Only a few writers still use the formal outlines most of us learned in college and high school. But nearly every writer returns to his purpose statement and makes it the foundation for a logical structure. Once the framework is in place, the first draft will take shape more easily.

The best articles are those that go through a rigorous rewrite process which consists of distance and objectivity. By setting the manuscript aside for several days before rewriting, the author achieves a little of both. By turning the manuscript over to a colleague for comments and suggestions, the author may improve the manuscript even more.

This is also the time to pass the manuscript through the chain of command — not for their approval but to keep them informed and allow other experts to check it for doctrine and OPSEC.

Before mailing the manuscript, take time to properly package it — especially if you have photos or charts which can be damaged. Include a title page, a phone number, a very short biography and a list of your sources. Write captions for any photographs or other graphic material.

Most importantly, continue to communicate with the journal. Often a manuscript will need additional work or verification of the facts before it's ready to go to press. While the journal staff will try to close the loop on every story it receives, two-way communication eliminates misunderstandings and clears the barriers to speedier publication. ■

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